

CASE STUDY # 8: Extramural Science Administrators Reviewing Manuscripts

Dr. Hubel is an SRA in NINDS. His scientific area is visual neuroscience, but his present responsibilities are the review of fellowship applications. He receives a request from the editor of The Journal of Neuroscience to review a paper submitted for publication by Dr. Klutz concerning signal transduction in the retina. He thinks that this activity will enhance his professional standing and his supervisor agrees that he can do this as an official duty activity. When he reviews the manuscript it is clear to him that there are fundamental problems in the experimental design and that the work is not of the quality normally expected for that journal. He writes a very negative review. A couple of months later as he is going through the fellowship applications he is to review, he notices that Dr. Auge's application has a supporting letter from his PhD mentor, Dr. Klutz. He discusses the situation with his supervisor.

Should Dr. Hubel have turned down the opportunity to review the manuscript from Dr. Klutz in the first place? Should he recuse himself from the review or can he simply alert the review panel to this potential conflict?

Reviewing scientific manuscripts submitted for publication is an activity that can enhance the professional standing and credibility of HSAs. This should be allowed when it doesn't interfere with the HSA's NIH job. However, occasionally, as in this situation, this activity will result in a conflict that must be managed. Since Dr. Hubel has reviewed Dr. Klutz's recent manuscript he should not handle the review of an application submitted by Dr. Klutz or an application in which Dr. Klutz is involved. It is not sufficient for Dr. Hubel to explain the potential conflict to the review panel. He must alert his supervisor to the conflict/appearance of conflict and recuse himself from handling the review.

If this kind of situation occurs with some frequency, it may affect the supervisor's willingness to approve Dr. Hubel's request to perform manuscript reviews. The supervisor needs to balance Dr. Hubel's professional development, etc. with his ability to perform his job. In this situation it may be difficult, but Dr. Hubel's supervisor should monitor his official duty activities and try to identify potential conflicts as they arise. For example, if Dr. Klutz had submitted an application that normally would go to Dr. Hubel for review, Dr. Hubel's supervisor should have been in a position to have ensured that that application was not referred to Dr. Hubel.

Does reviewing a manuscript always put an SRA in conflict; and if so, for how long?

A number of considerations impact on the seriousness of the conflict or perceived conflict. Note that in the situation described the review of the manuscript occurred recently – had this review occurred several years earlier, there probably would be no need for a recusal. Indeed, Dr. Hubel might not even remember that he reviewed the manuscript. In all similar cases common sense and professional judgment should be brought to bear. However, it is always useful when an employee notes a potential concern to discuss it with the supervisor.

Would the matter be handled differently were Dr. Hubel a program officer, rather than an SRA?

Similar considerations come into play were Dr. Hubel a program officer. In fact, since program officers are in a position to make a recommendation regarding funding the potential for an appearance of conflict may even be greater. Finally, there are some extramural scientists who have no responsibilities for specific applications (for example, scientist in policy offices). For these individuals it may be appropriate for the supervisor to issue a blanket waiver allowing them to review manuscripts without seeking separate approval for each, but this will apply to only a small number of extramural scientists.